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Elie Wiesel: Conscience of Humanity

IRWIN COTLER*

The passing of Professor Elie Wiesel was—and on his *shloshim* today remains—a personal and profound loss. It is akin to the passing of a “*Lamed Vavnik*”—which as legend has it, are the 36 righteous people living in the world. Their just lives, at any given moment, redeem humanity. This is how I always felt about the person who was my teacher, mentor, role model, inspiration, and friend of 50 years—in a word, the most remarkable and inspirational human being I have ever encountered and had the honour to work with in common cause.

Indeed, Elie Wiesel’s life’s work—his life itself—is a source of learning and inspiration for us all. In remembering Elie Wiesel, we remember and celebrate the life of a *tzaddik*, a just and righteous person who has come to symbolize and embody the conscience of humanity—not only by and for Jews, but by and for humanity as a whole. Accordingly, when the Nobel Prize Committee awarded Elie the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 the choice was greeted with international acclaim, for it was difficult to imagine any other person in the world who had so commanded the respect of political leaders and the people themselves—who had become our collective moral compass in a world devoid of moral leadership, our brothers’ and sisters’ keeper in a world of amoral international bystanders.

Elie wrote, as the title of one of his works suggests, as a “Soul on Fire.” That flame not only animated the literary imagination—and had he received the Nobel Prize for Literature the acclaim would have been no less—but it ignited the struggle for peace and justice worldwide. His eloquence was all the more remarkable, because as he would often put it, the Holocaust was beyond vocabulary. Yet the man who felt that Auschwitz and Buchenwald were beyond communication and comprehension not only conveyed the particularity of things too terrible to be

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believed but not too terrible to have happened, but also transmitted the universality of the messages—the lessons—that we continue to ignore at our peril, including:

THE DANGER OF FORGETTING AND THE IMPERATIVE OF REMEMBRANCE

President Obama described Elie Wiesel as having told him during his visit to the Buchenwald death camp, that “Memory has become a sacred duty of all people of goodwill”, adding that “upholding that sacred duty was the purpose of Elie’s life.” As Elie wrote in *Night*, his first classic memoir of Holocaust remembrance depicting the horrors of Auschwitz, published in 1960: “to forget would not only be dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.” Interestingly enough, the original version of this memoir was in Yiddish, ran to 800 pages, and was titled “*Un Di Velt Hot Geshvign*”—“And the World Remained Silent.” Indeed, the Yiddish title was a more compelling and revealing one, but which, like the book itself, was condensed in translation—200 pages in the French edition and 100 pages in the English one.

But the haunting words of Elie Wiesel remain, albeit diluted somewhat in translation:

Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.

THE DANGER OF SILENCE IN THE FACE OF EVIL—THE IMPERATIVE OF STANDING UP AGAINST INJUSTICE.

As Elie Wiesel put it in his 1986 Nobel Prize lecture, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor never the victim, silence encourages the tormentor never the tormented . . . wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion or political views that place must—at that moment—become the centre of the universe.” And he added: “there may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time where we fail to protest against injustice.”

THE DANGER OF STATE SANCTIONED CULTURES OF HATE – THE
RESPONSIBILITY TO PREVENT.

The enduring lessons of the holocaust, and the genocides that followed in Srebrenica, Rwanda and Darfur—where Elie sounded the alarm again and again—is that the Shoah, and these genocides, occurred not only because of the machinery of death but because of state sanctioned ideologies of hate. It is this teaching of contempt, this demonizing of the other, this is where it all begins, which is why Elie was such an outspoken leader in holding the incendiary incitement of Khamenei's Iran—as distinct from the people and publics of Iran—to account. It is not unrevealing—and particularly poignant—to appreciate that July 1, the day before Elie's passing, was marked by Khamenei's Iran as Al-Quds day, with its attending Holocaust denial and call for removing “this cancerous tumour Israel from the Middle East.”

THE DANGER OF INDIFFERENCE AND INACTION IN THE FACE OF MASS
ATROCITY AND GENOCIDE – THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT.

What made the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda so unspeakable was not only the horror of the genocides themselves but that these genocides were preventable. We knew and we did not act, just as we knew and did not act in the genocide in Darfur, and just as we know and have not acted in the mass atrocities in Syria. As Elie warned us again and again, indifference in the face of evil is acquiescence with evil itself—it is complicity with evil.

In a memorable piece published in Tablet Magazine on the occasion of Elie's passing, a longtime friend and disciple Menachem Z. Rosensaft wrote as follows:

He believed fervently, passionately, that a paramount responsibility inherent in his survival, alongside remembrance, was to speak out forcefully against indifference and against suffering, persecution, or oppression of any kind. His charge to the thousands of survivors and their children assembled in Jerusalem for the 1981 World Gathering reflected the universality of this worldview: “In an age tainted by violence, we must teach coming generations of the origins and consequences of violence. In a society of bigotry and indifference, we must tell our contemporaries that whatever the answer, it must grow out of human compassion and reflect man's relentless quest for justice and memory”

THE DANGER OF EVIL MASKED UNDER THE COVER OF LAW – OUR
RESPONSIBILITY TO UNMASK AND CONFRONT EVIL – THE BETRAYAL OF
THE ELITES

As Elie reminded us always: “It is our responsibility to confront evil, as Raoul Wallenberg did, to resist it, to expose it—particularly when evil masks itself under the cover of law.” For let us not forget, on this the 80th anniversary of the coming into effect of the Nuremberg Race Laws and the 70th anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials—this “Double Entendre of Nuremberg: the Nuremberg of Hate and the Nuremberg of Justice”—which inspired the international legal symposium on this subject with Elie as its Honourary Chair.

The Nazis committed mass murder under the cover of law—aided and abetted by Nuremberg elites—doctors, lawyers, judges, educators, engineers, architects and the like—la *trahison des clercs*. As Elie succinctly put it “why was the Nazi era so horrifying? Because the law itself was immoral. The killers were convinced that they were obeying the law. And indeed it was the law to kill children, parents, old men, and women, all those who needed protection. It was the law to be inhuman.” Holocaust crimes were the crimes of the Nuremberg elites. As Elie continued, “Cold blooded murder and culture did not exclude each other. If the Holocaust proved anything, it is that a person could love poems and kill children.”

And so it is our responsibility, as Elie taught us, to speak truth to power and to hold power accountable to truth, as Elie did so memorably on receiving the Congressional Medal of Freedom. It was April 19, 1985—the 42nd anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and just before US President Ronald Reagan was to lay a wreath at a German military cemetery in Bitburg. In the public ceremony Elie told the President that “I belong to a people that speaks truth to power . . . Mr. President, your place is not that place, your place is with the victims.”

Similarly, at the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington on April 22, 1993, two years before the mass murder at Srebrenica, Elie Wiesel called on the President to intervene to stop the killing. “Mr. President, I cannot not tell you something. I have been in the former Yugoslavia last fall. I cannot sleep since for what I have seen. As a Jew I am saying that we must do something to stop the bloodshed in that country! People fight each other and children die. Why? Something, anything must be done.”

And so, those entrusted with the education and training of the leaders of tomorrow should ensure that Elie Wiesel is studied in schools of law, medicine, engineering, architecture, education, theology—and

not just in classes of literature; that the “double entendre” of Nuremberg is part of our learning as it is part of our legacy; that Holocaust education must underpin our perspective as it informs our principles—on justice and injustice.

THE DANGER OF ANTI-SEMITISM – OLD AND NEW – THE RESPONSIBILITY TO COMBAT

Simply put, 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz—1.1 million of them were Jews—of which Elie Wiesel was one. One million of them were murdered, including Elie’s parents and sister. But let there be no mistake about it, as Elie would remind us again and again, Jews were murdered at Auschwitz because of anti-Semitism, but anti-Semitism itself did not die at Auschwitz. As we have learned only too tragically, and all too well, while it begins with Jews it does not end with Jews. Jew-hatred remains the canary in the mineshaft of global evil that threatens us all.

As Elie put it, on the dawn of the 21st Century, and repeatedly warned, even before the latest and dramatic global escalation in anti-Semitism—that he “wished to share the feeling of urgency, if not emergency, that we believe anti-Semitism represents and calls for. I have not felt the way I do now since 1945. There are reasons to feel concerned and alarmed. Now is the time to mobilize the efforts of all of humanity”. In this, as in so many of his teachings, his words led to action, helping to inspire the founding of the Inter-parliamentary Coalition to Combat anti-Semitism (ICCA) and where he served as International Chair and Keynote Speaker of the ICCA Conference held in Ottawa in November 2010.

THE DANGER OF IMPUNITY AND THE IMPERATIVE OF BRINGING WAR CRIMINALS TO JUSTICE.

If the 20th century was the age of atrocity—these horrors continuing into the 21st—they have also been the age of impunity. Few of the perpetrators of state sanctioned mass killings have been brought to justice. The purpose of Nuremberg—and international tribunals established since—was to deter mass atrocity, to protect the victims, to prosecute the perpetrators. Regrettably, the credibility of these tribunals have been undermined by their sometimes failure to bring perpetrators to justice or their selective use of justice. Even the Nuremberg trials were themselves critiqued for “selective justice” in that few of the perpetrators were put on trial, with the selective prosecution serving to whitewash the others.

But as Elie would remind us—the power of the Nuremberg Tribunal—not unlike the International Criminal Tribunals for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda—lies also in the bearing of witness. Indeed, it lies in the affirmation of memory—of fidelity to truth—in the “triumph of memory” and where memory allowed justice to be served.

Elie captured the paradox—and the pain—of selective justice redeemed by memory in his own bearing of witness in the Inaugural Raoul Wallenberg Lecture in Human Rights at a Conference on “Nuremberg 40 Years Later” at McGill University in 1987, titled simply, yet movingly enough, “Witness”. He said:

Justice was served, but, above everything else, in a strange way, in a dark poetic way, it was memory that was confronted and celebrated at Nuremberg. When hundreds and hundreds of witnesses emerged to piece together a story—a story that we all must remember, although our memory and our mind and our soul are too small to comprehend it, to take it all in. Our sanity was at stake. If we remembered everything, we would lose our minds. But then, if we don’t remember everything, we also lose our minds.

And as he put it so movingly in his address to the United Nations on the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau,

The Jewish witness speaks of his people’s suffering as a warning. He sounds the alarm so as to prevent these things being done. He knows for the dead it is too late. . . but it is not too late for today’s children, ours and yours. It is for their sake alone that we bare witness. It is for their sake that we are duty-bound to denounce anti-Semitism, racism, and religious or ethnic hatred. Those who today preach and practice the cult of death. Those who use suicide terrorism, the scourge of this new century, must be tried and condemned for crimes against humanity. Suffering confers no privileges. It is what one does with suffering that matters. Yes, the past is in the present but the future is still in our hands.

And he concluded:

Those who survived Auschwitz advocate hope, not despair; generosity, not rancor or bitterness; gratitude, not violence. We must be engaged, we must reject indifference as an option. Indifference always helps the aggressor, never his victims. And what is memory if not a noble and necessary response to and against indifference?

But . . . will the world ever learn?

THE VULNERABILITY OF THE POWERLESS AND THE POWERLESSNESS OF
THE VULNERABLE – THE PROTECTION OF THE VULNERABLE AS THE TEST
OF A JUST SOCIETY

The genocide of European Jewry occurred also not only because of the vulnerability of the powerless, but also because of the powerlessness of the vulnerable. It is not surprising that the triage of Nazi racial hygiene—the Sterilization Laws, the Nuremberg Race Laws, the Euthanasia Program – targeted those “whose lives were not worth living”; and it is not unrevealing as Professor Henry Friedlander pointed out in his work on “The Origins of Genocide”, that the first group targeted for killing were the Jewish disabled—the whole anchored in the science of death, the medicalization of ethnic cleansing, the sanitizing even of the vocabulary of destruction.

And so it is our responsibility—as Elie taught and demonstrated in his good deeds, whether we be government representatives or *citoyen du monde*—to give voice to the voiceless, as we seek to empower the powerless—be they the disabled, the poor, the refugee, the elderly, the women victims of violence, the vulnerable child—whoever and wherever they may be.

As my daughter Gila put it, at 15 years of age, and invoked by Elie: “Daddy, if you want to know what the test of human rights is, always ask yourself at any time, in any situation, in any part of the world, is it good for children? Is what is happening good for children?”

And as Elie spoke so movingly in his lecture on “Witness:”

I could spend centuries speaking in praise of Jewish children. One million or more, they were the first target of the enemy. If, from now until I die, I were to do nothing else but name them, simply recite name after name—and the least they could expect is that their names be remembered—I would die before reaching the end of the list. Those children were brave, and noble, and so generous. They would sneak out of the ghetto clandestinely, risking prison for eating or death, to bring a potato back to their parents, a piece of bread to their friends. Izhak Katnelson proposed to erect a monument to the Jewish child.

And so Elie emerged as the leading *melitz yosher* (“advocate”) for children—for the brutalized children of the killing fields of the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Darfur—just as he was a leading advocate for Ethiopian Jewish children in Israel.

HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE AND DENIAL: THE RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE

Elie Wiesel was the inspiration for the four historic Stockholm Conferences on Conscience and Humanity, 2000-2004, whose generic theme dealt with the importance of Holocaust remembrance, research and education. In particular, the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of Victims of the Holocaust—now commemorated on January 27th each year, grew out of the first Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, whose thinking and language were also inspired by Elie. As one who headed the Canadian Delegation to the Stockholm Conferences, I can attest to Elie's impact as Honourary Chair, as well as then Swedish Prime minister Goran Persson, who founded and chaired the conferences, the last of which was on the prevention of genocide

Important excerpts of the Stockholm Declaration on the Holocaust now follow—you can almost hear and feel Elie's words, and the impact of his hushed eloquence:

The Holocaust fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilization . . . [its] unprecedented character will always hold universal meaning . . . [its] magnitude . . . must be forever seared in our collective memory . . . together we must uphold the terrible truths of the Holocaust against those who deny it.

We must strengthen the moral commitment of our people and the political commitment of our governments, to ensure that future generations can understand the causes of the Holocaust and reflect upon its consequences.

We pledge to strengthen efforts to promote education, remembrance and research about the Holocaust

We share a commitment to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions . . . a commitment to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to honour those who stood against it . . . a commitment to throw light on the still obscured shadows of the Holocaust . . . a commitment to plant the seeds of a better future amidst the soil of a bitter past . . . a commitment . . . to remember the victims who perished, respect the survivors still with us, and reaffirm humanity's common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice.

THE DANGER OF ABANDONMENT: DEFENDING POLITICAL PRISONERS AS A SPECIAL COMMANDMENT

It is somewhat surprising that Elie Wiesel's heroic role in the defending of political prisoners—inspired by and also anchored in the commandment of "*pideon shvuim*", the liberation of political prison-

ers—has not always received the distinguishable recognition that it warrants.

Indeed, Elie was not only a heroic—historic—voice in the struggle for Soviet Jewry, but also for the imprisoned Prisoners of Zion, as attested to by Natan Sharansky; not only an advocate on behalf of the disappeared in Argentina, but for political prisoner Jacobo Timmerman; not only in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa but on behalf of imprisoned anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela, and so on. As one who had the privilege of acting on behalf of these political prisoners, I can attest once again to the singular role of Elie Wiesel in the defense of political prisoners, as has my colleague and friend, Professor Alan Der-showitz, who has written how his work on behalf of political prisoners in the Soviet Union was inspired by Elie Wiesel.

As Elie put it in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech on the danger of silence and indifference in the face of evil,

[T]hat is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation . . . apartheid is, in my view, as abhorrent as anti-Semitism. To me, Andrei Sakharov is as much of a disgrace as Joseph Begun's imprisonment. As is the denial of the "Solidarity" trade union and denial of Lech Walesa's right to dissent and Nelson Mandela's interminable imprisonment . . . as long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true.

ISRAEL AS AN ANTIDOTE TO JEWISH POWERLESSNESS

Nazism succeeded not only because of the state-sanctioned hate and crimes of indifference, not only because of "*la trahison des clercs*" and eliminationist anti-Semitism, but because of the powerlessness of the Jew, and so—the vulnerability of the Jew.

Simply put, it is not the case, as we are sometimes told, that if there had not been a Holocaust, there would not be a state of Israel. It is the other way around—that if there had been an Israel, there might well not have been a Holocaust, or the horrors of Jewish history. As Elie put it:

At least there would have been a place for refuge. At the Evian conference in 1938 and beyond, Europe was divided into two places—those where the Jews could not leave—or even live—and those where they could not enter.

At least there would have been universes that could have been saved, an antidote to the radical evil of the Shoah.

At least there would have been an old-new state, an "ancient homeland for an ancient people," for the ingathering of the exiles.

At least there would have been a living expression of “zachor”—remembrance, as an antidote to the oldest and enduring hatred of anti-Semitism.

At least there would have been a state founded—however imperfectly it may act—on “*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*”—“justice, justice, shall you pursue.”

At least we might have been spared the horrors that underpinned the searing testimony of Elie Wiesel himself in his first memoir *Night*, or as found expression in his incredible Raoul Wallenberg lectureship titled “Witness”. Listen to his words, as his inaugural lectureship was a transformative event for all who attended—a case study in how an encounter with Elie Wiesel can be a life changing experience of the highest moral character. Former Canadian Supreme Court Justice Claire L’heureux-Dubé was inspired to write a poem; human rights advocates from all over the world sat transfixed and transformed; students still recall how the experience changed their lives; the clergy—Christians, Jews, and Muslims—made it the subject of interfaith dialogue. Herewith but one small excerpt from this searing testimony,

How can you bear witness when the memory has attained such a dimension that it is broken down by language? No word will ever contain the silence of one child, when that child went to the nocturnal flames. No word can contain the prayer of an old man who, hand in hand with his grandchild, stepped forward to the mass grave. No word can contain the anguish that preceded a selection in a concentration camp. No word can ever contain the fear that descended on a ghetto at certain times, at certain moments. No word can contain the solitude, the solitude of the Jewish victim who was more alone and more abandoned and more tragic than all the other victims. Granted, there were other victims as well; we should never forget them either. But the solitude of the Jewish victims remains unparalleled. How many times must we repeat that? Everyone who was not Jewish had family outside. Thus, the non-Jewish prisoner could cling to hope: “If I die, my son will live. My parents will have more children. My sister will remarry.” The Jewish prisoner knew that he or she was alone, maybe the last, for his or her entire family had been condemned to extinction. An entire people was sentenced to death for being.

May I close on a personal note: As my colleague John Roth once wrote—“in allowing me to enter his life, Elie has given meaning to mine.” Elie Wiesel as a conscience of humanity has impacted all of humanity—not as an abstraction but on people individually in their daily lives—as he has in my own life and work.

Where in 1962 I read *Night* for the first time on the eve of my first-ever visit to Auschwitz, where I was shocked and outraged when our guide referenced all the nationalities murdered at Auschwitz but omitted the word “Jew”.

As a student I became involved in the struggle for Soviet Jewry on reading Elie Wiesel’s classic work in 1965 on “The Jews of Silence,” served as a wakeup call for the struggle for Soviet Jewry, referring not just to the Jews silenced in the Soviet Union, but to the silence of Jews in the free world who were not standing up to that injustice; and where his clarion call mobilized generations in that struggle, and where we had our first of lifelong encounters.

Where as a law professor, I was profoundly influenced by Elie’s writings, suffused as they were with the pursuit of justice;

Where as a human rights lawyer I was inspired by his passion and commitment to *tikkun olam*—the betterment of the human condition—in the best sense of the word.

Where as counsel to prisoners of conscience, Elie’s voice and testimony was our most powerful ally;

Where as an MP he was for me, as for parliamentarians worldwide, an inspiration in our work.

Where as a *citoyen du monde*, whenever I would feel despair about the human condition, or about what we could do about it, or feel overwhelmed by evil—or the indifference that would accompany it—I would remember Elie Wiesel’s words on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, and which resonate no less powerfully 30 years later. “There’s so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victims of hunger, of racism, and of political persecutions . . . prisoners in so many lands governed by the Left and the Right . . . more people oppressed than free.”

But then, always, the call to action. In Elie’s words:

[T]here’s much to be done, there’s much that can be done. One person—Raoul Wallenberg—one person of integrity, can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

As Elie would remind me again and again, we must never be bystanders to injustice, never be indifferent to human suffering, never be

silent in the face of evil, never abandon the victim to stand alone. It is this that inspired the founding of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights—where Elie Wiesel was our Honourary Chair—and where the Centre's agenda is anchored in, and inspired by, Elie's teaching and action. Indeed, the best remembrance, and the best tribute we can pay to Elie Wiesel, is to commit to action, such as that which found expression in the "Never Again Declaration" that we adopted at the International Legal Symposium at Jagiellonian University in May 2016—co-chaired by the Raoul Wallenberg Human Rights Centre and the March of the Living—and where Elie acted as our Honourary Chair, one of his last public acts.

The closing excerpt of this "Never Again Declaration" inspired by Elie Wiesel is as follows:

Never again will we be indifferent to incitement and hate. Never again will we be silent in the face of evil. Never again will we indulge racism and anti-Semitism. Never again will we ignore the plight of the vulnerable. Never again will we be indifferent to mass atrocity and impunity. But we will speak up and act against indifference, against racism, against hate, against anti-Semitism, against mass atrocity, and against the crime of crimes whose name we should even shudder to mention: genocide.